

Gap Year

Maybe you're tired of the academic grind. Maybe you're not sure why you're going to college or what you'll do when you get there. Maybe you yearn to explore far-away places or a dig deeper into a career that interests you. If this sounds like you, perhaps now is the time to consider taking a gap year between high school and college.

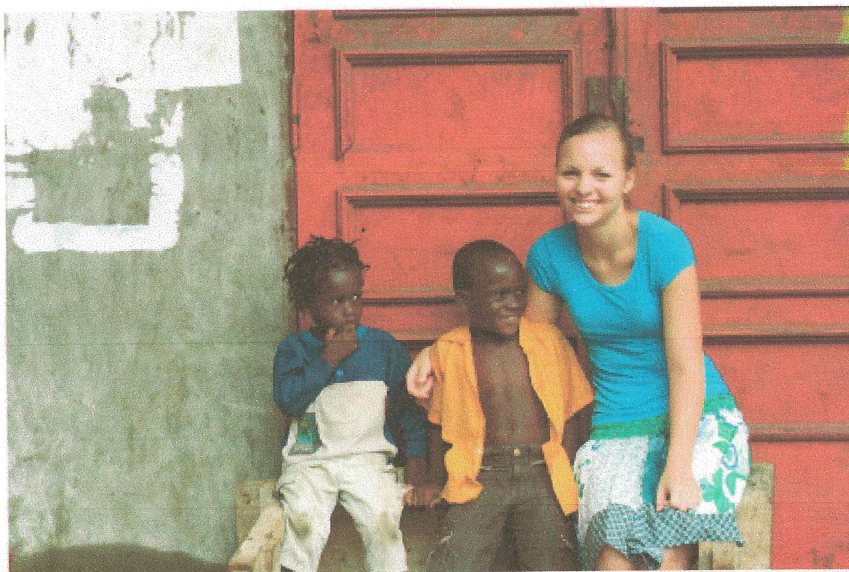
"While there is significant peer pressure, parental pressure and school pressure to go right on to college, the adventurous few who take time off are richly rewarded," states the executive director of Dynamy Internship Year (MA). "Taking time off before college gives you the gift of time to learn about two essential things: yourself and the world around you." Of course, if your time off consists of nothing but watching soap operas and eating potato chips, all you'll have at the end is a wasted year. But with research and planning, you can design a semester or year that is both a great learning experience and a lot of fun.

What Are My Options?

There are thousands of options for time off, as well as infinite combinations of activities. Some students participate in year-long programs. Others may combine two or more short-term programs, or plan a trip on their own or with friends. Here are some common ways to spend your time off:

Travel: Many organizations offer programs with an emphasis on traveling or living abroad. Or, you may wish to plan your own adventure.

Internships: Spend some time working in a career field that interests you. If you enjoy it, you'll have even more incentive to succeed in your chosen college major. If it's not the field for you, you'll still have plenty of time to explore other career opportunities.



Volunteer work: You can find volunteer programs both in the US and all over the world. You could build houses, work with children, work on environmental projects, or a host of other activities.

Academics: Students who are not pleased with their high school records might consider a postgraduate (PG) year. The goal

for a PG year is to strengthen your academic record in the hope of gaining entry to a better college.

Work: Whether you find a job at home or away, a year of work can give you extra funds to pay for college, plus valuable, real-life experience.

If you choose to participate in an organized gap year program, investigate each one and find out what areas they emphasize. "On the surface they all look very similar, but there are some very key differences that are important to look at," says the CEO and co-founder of Thinking Beyond Borders. "What is the outcome that the gap year program is looking for?"

Some organizations may advertise programs that focus on community service, others promise a personal growth experience. "Then there are those that are very focused on education, making sure that the students have a very rigorous academic experience when they're abroad."

What About College?

Once you've decided to take time off, it's tempting to chuck the whole college search until next year. But that's not a good idea, for a number of reasons. *First*, the college search and application process is much easier while you're still in high school. "All of the resources are there, the guidance counselors are there," the CEO says. "All of the people you want to get letters of recommendation from are there." You don't want to be filling out applications and trying to get counselor recommendations while you're working in the rainforests of South America. *Second*, having your college plans in place can go a long way toward convincing your parents that you will go back to school after your time off. "My parents were scared that I would never go to college, but by applying I demonstrated my seriousness," remembers an international college counselor who took a year off between high school and college.

So go ahead and complete the college admission process. Then contact the college you plan to attend and ask that your admission be deferred for a semester or a year. Most colleges are very receptive to students who want to defer their admission. "Admission people across the country encourage the idea of time out before matriculation," says the owner of Time Out Associations (MA). All of this can make you even busier than your classmate's senior year. "Taking a year off is actually more work, because you should apply and get accepted to college as well as figure out what you are doing for the next year," the counselor advises.

Where Do I Start?

The essential component of successful time off is planning. There are plenty of resources for students, including books, Web sites, and your high school counselor (see below). At your school or public library, look through a guidebook or two on traveling, internships, volunteering and other opportunities for high school students. What types of programs appeal to you?

Once you have an idea of what opportunities are available, think about goals you should have for your time off. Do you want to travel abroad? Learn a new language or improve your foreign language skills? Help others, either at home or abroad? Explore career interests? Challenge yourself in the outdoors? It's important to have something meaningful in mind.

What Factors Should I Consider?

You may have a number of reasons for deciding to take a gap year. For one student, who finished a gap year with Thinking Beyond Borders, the decision to postpone her freshman year allowed her to take a step back from the rigorous demands of the college application process. "I didn't like that everything I did in high school was sort of geared at getting into college," she says. "For me, a gap year was something that would be completely my own." Plan wisely. Remember why you have committed to a gap year and find a program that fits your unique needs.

Consider these questions when planning time off:

- What do I want to learn?
- How much structure do I want or need?
- Where in the world do I want to be?
- What kinds of things do I want to do?
- What will I do when things get very difficult? What is my emergency plan?

Another big factor is your budget. Talk to your family about your plans and about what you can afford. Some programs cost very little; others can be very expensive. Don't forget to plan for living and travel expenses as well as program fees. Students on a limited budget could consider working full-time for a summer or semester to pay for a semester-long program later in the year.

As you research and plan, don't limit yourself too much. "Take a risk," says the international counselor. "Living outside of your comfort zone is an important factor in growth." Another alumnus of the Thinking Beyond Borders program, enjoyed the experience of being immersed in different cultures. "We would travel to a country where that issue was relevant, live and work with the people it was affecting, talk to local experts and innovators about their perspectives, and read articles and books about the issue." Before embarking on a gap year, let your expectations help you plan. Do you think a gap year involves relocating to a foreign city and studying a new culture? Or does it involve a survey of world cultures, as you travel around the globe engaging in community service projects? Only you can decide how your gap year will unfold.

Here is a sample itinerary from Thinking Beyond Borders:

- two week orientation in Costa Rica
- a month in Ecuador studying clean water infrastructure and the economics of development
- a week in Peru, where she climbed Machu Pichu
- a month in China studying public education while teaching English in local schools

- a week in Cambodia, visiting Angkor Watt and learning about the genocide a month in Vietnam learning about waste management and the aftereffects of the war
- a month in Thailand learning about scuba diving and sustainable agriculture
- a month in South Africa learning about health care and the HIV epidemic while shadowing home based care workers in surrounding townships
- "All the issues we were learning about were so loaded, and the whole experience challenged a lot of my assumptions about a lot of different things; A year off is an adventure," the students said. "Don't expect it to be easy. Welcome the new challenges you encounter as you enter into the ongoing process of creating the life you want to lead. The real question of life is beyond college credit."

Books:

- *The Gap-Year Advantage: Helping Your Child Benefit from Time Off Before or During College* by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson
- *Taking Time Off* by Gail Reardon
- *Taking a Gap Year* by Susan Griffith
- *But What If I Don't Want to Go to College? A Guide to Success Through Alternative Education* by Harlow G. Unger
- *The Back Door Guide to Short-Term Job Adventures: Internships, Extraordinary Experiences, Seasonal Jobs, Volunteering, Work Abroad* by Michael Landes (not specifically for high-school students)
- *Alternatives to the Peace Corps: A Directory of Third World and U.S. Volunteer Opportunities (9th Ed.)* by Joan Powell (Editor)

Web Sites & Resources

- A school counseling site, with a long list of program Web sites:
www.andover.edu/summerops/ilist.htm
- Whereyouheaded.com: A consulting firm for students planning time off.
- GapYear.com: A large site about time-off options, including students' diaries about their year off. This is from the perspective of the United Kingdom, where gap years are very popular. Americans may need to "translate" a few things, such as references to money in British pounds.
- USAGapYearFairs.org: This site from Thinking Beyond Borders and Dynamy Internship Year provides a directory of gap year programs and a list of 30 national gap year fairs.
- Teenlife: Free access to a lists nearly 300 gap year programs.

Back to: Guidance for Seniors

1050 North Highland Street, Suite 400, Arlington, VA 22201 | Phone: 800-822-6285 | Fax: 703-243-9375 | Email: info@nacacnet.org